

With Outstretched Hands
Luke 2:1-20
December 24, 2018 Christmas Eve

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Perhaps you've heard the rather amusing story about a woman who, just three days before Christmas, suddenly remembered that she had yet to send out any Christmas cards. Without a moment's hesitation, she hastily arranged a select list of all those business associates, friends and relatives to whom she wished to extend season's greetings and hurried down to the nearest store. Sprinting through the almost depleted Christmas section, she finally located a box of cards picturing the peaceful serenity of a Bethlehem stable and bought it immediately. In a flurry of near panic, she raced home to stamp and make labels for each envelope, thrust a card and her business card into the envelopes, rushed over to the closest mailbox, and minutes later found herself again at home.

A relaxed smile slowly began to soften her exhausted expression, and with a silent nod of approval, she secretly congratulated herself for having completed the chore with such efficiency. As she sat there quietly nursing a cup of coffee, however, she happened to notice a few remaining cards still

lying in the box and realized that, in all the hectic confusion, she hadn't actually bothered to read any of them. She opened one and was shocked to find that the cards consisted of but one line: *"This simple note is just to say...a little gift is on its way."*

Of course, part of what makes this particular story so humorous is that we all recognize that those aren't exactly the sentiments that this poor woman intended. And yet, it seems that the message of that card does indeed echo the equally unexpected announcement of a holy and silent night long ago.

On that night, God reached out to us with outstretched hands and gave us a most unanticipated gift – God's own self. What we celebrate on Christmas Eve is the arrival of One we call Emmanuel – the God who is with us. In ways we will never fully comprehend, this little baby is with us because he's made of exactly the same stuff we are and also the same stuff God is, and he would never let go of either. With outstretched hands he held on to both, so that he could bring the two together.

That is the message we proclaim, and if it doesn't strike you as being rather shocking – maybe even a little scandalous – then chances are you have not heard the message for what it is. As one minister puts it, “The high and lofty One became for our sakes lowly and helpless. The eternal and infinite One deliberately chose the constraints of time and flesh. The God of all mercies [was willing to be put] at our mercy.” (Bob Crilley, “Gift Wrapped in Swaddling Cloths” on Luke 2:1-7 and Titus 2:11-14) I know of no other religion bold enough even to entertain that possibility. Yes, Christians assert, God is with us. Even in the worst of times, even in the most unimaginable of conditions, God is still present. As the Apostle Paul puts it in one of his letters, “...the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all...” (Titus 2:11) That is the Good News we declare to the world tonight, and what is both “Good and New about it is the incredible claim that, in Jesus Christ, we encounter this grace in person. Emmanuel means God-With-Us, not God-Somewhere-Up-There.” (Crilley) Jesus is not a Christmas card from God that says, “Wishing I was there.” Jesus is God's way of saying, “I choose to make

your home my own, your place my place. I choose to make your room my room.”

In a way, it reminds me of an experience my wife Roberta and I had with our daughter Lori when she was an infant. On a Saturday night, some 30 years ago, Lori was sick with an ear infection, and could not go to sleep. She was fine as long as we held her in our arms, but as soon as we put her down she would start screaming.

Roberta and I tried everything to get little Lori to go to sleep, but had no success. We took turns holding her, rocking her, singing to her. I was still working on Sunday's sermon, I confess, and at one point, I even preached my half-written sermon to her. After all, I figured that since it puts folks to sleep on Sunday morning, it ought to work as well on Saturday night! But it was to no avail. I sat down at my desk and tried again to write. After some time, I noticed the house had grown quiet. I thought to myself, “How has Roberta gotten her to be quiet? This I've got to see!”

I tiptoed back to the bedroom to witness the miracle firsthand. What I discovered is that Roberta had crawled beside Lori's crib on a makeshift egg carton mattress in Lori's room. In effect, she decided to make our child's room her own.

As I watched the two of them, I realized that that's not a bad image for Christmas. On a silent and holy night long ago, God came down from heaven, and crawled into our homes, our rooms even. Only in this case, God took the unique step of actually becoming the child in that room. And by becoming a baby, God did more than simply room with us, make a home among us; God also placed a claim upon us. God invited us to respond to God's claim. As a relatively new grandfather, I'm reminded again that if you've ever cradled a baby in your arms, you know what God is getting at. There is nothing as vulnerable and utterly dependent as an infant. This is why an infant summons something from us. During those first days and months, as a baby begins to take in all the sights and sounds of life, we can't help but be taken in too. A

response is demanded. A deep commitment is called forth from us. This tiny, helpless child is reaching up to us with outstretched hands for comfort and protection, and above all else, love.

With outstretched hands. My friends, that's a good portrayal of Emmanuel, God with us. In fact, when I think about it, that's at the heart of Jesus' invitation to people during his ministry.

With outstretched hands, he welcomed the little children, embraced them, and said, "Let the little children come to me, and forbid them not, for of such is the Kingdom of God."

With outstretched hands, he reached out to touch the untouchables, the lepers, healing them; to touch the deeply troubled, casting out the demons from them; to touch the blind and the lame, giving them sight and mobility.

With outstretched hands, Jesus taught the crowds about God's kingdom and God's love, telling the people about...

... a God who is like a shepherd, reaching out to rescue the lost sheep.

...a God who is like a woman, reaching down to find a lost coin and celebrating with a party because she found it.

...a God who is like a father, running to hug and hold that long lost son who has come home.

With outstretched hands, our Lord Jesus, in the supreme act of love, allowed his hands to be nailed to the wood of a cross for us and our salvation.

And finally, with outstretched hands, this same Jesus was raised by God's power from the dead and ascended into heaven where he sits in power at the right hand of God.

But tonight, my friends, is when it began, with an unexpected gift – the baby Jesus in a manger-- the one, who, with outstretched hands invites us to draw him near tonight, to let him make his home with us. Yes, we know that God in Christ reached out to us in love, grace, mercy and peace this night and always. Merry Christmas, my friends. Amen.